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ABSTRACT

Charter schools have developed in response to a demand for innovation in public education. Charter schools often begin with much parent and community involvement; yet, the role of parents is often unclear. This paper presents findings of a study that examined parent participation in one urban and one suburban charter school in the northeastern United States. Data were gathered from interviews with 10 parents (6 urban and 4 suburban), a questionnaire of 18 parents (8 urban and 10 suburban), and journals kept by 2 urban parents. Parents cited curriculum, technology, and character education as the reasons for sending their children to charter schools. However, the role of parent involvement remained unclear for some parents. The confusion and the resulting low parent involvement might be attributed to the vagueness of the term "open-door" policy or to parents' time constraints. Eight questions for future research regarding parent involvement are presented. (LMI)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN A CHARTER SCHOOL

Parent Involvement in a Charter School
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Abstract

Charter schools have developed out of a cry for innovating public education. They are the new experiment in education. One issue revolving around a common component of the charter school philosophy is parent involvement. An urban charter school in the Northeast has been extensively examined through parent surveys and interviews. One case study supplied much of the information used to demonstrate the conceptions parents may have regarding their role and involvement. This study will exemplify the discrepancies between charter school philosophies and the impact in has on the amount, type and what the role of parent involvement means.

The growing concern and demands for changes in public school has arrived and the new wave of education is here. Charter schools are public schools but are not subject to the same rules and guidelines for curriculum, allocation of funds, management, and policies as public schools. Charter schools are in effect, more decentralized than public schools picking up where public schools presumably have failed. Thus charter schools are an experiment in education.

An alternative to public schools are charter schools. One of the outstanding qualities of charter schools is the individual philosophies of each. The philosophies are diverse, for example the type of curriculum may be dependant on the creating force behind the charter school. The curriculum may range more broadly to include Spanish as a second language, virtues, adult education, interaction through job core or volunteer work. They may be conservative, including a concentration on specific cultures, languages, college prep classes, and technology skills. Each charter school shares efforts towards decentralization to become a community based environment for learning. They strive for equal involvement in the school between, community, parents, and teachers to benefit the students. Charter schools may share similar characteristics in their philosophies. Parent involvement is common in charter schools. In some cases, parents are required to know, understand, and agree to the schools philosophy, including curriculum, and educational testing standards. Then the parents sign an agreement contract at the time of apply. The idea behind parent involvement is a partnership between parents and school where parents are viewed as the primary educator.

Charter schools often enlist parents at the "primary educator"; however, the meaning of this seems uncertain. These schools often begin with much parent and community involvement; yet, the role of parents in this school reform is often unclear. While many of these schools have a philosophy of "parent as primary educator" some have no clear guidelines on the role of parents in this process. Discrepancies in parents views may reflect their uncertainty regarding involvement, that is what is expected of them; where they should get involved; and how much time they should be involved. This on-going study will provide information necessary to understand how parents perceive their role in charter schools.

Method

Eight parents of first grades from an urban school and ten from a suburban charter school responded to a questionnaire; six (2 male) parents agreed to a comprehensive audiotaped interview. Four suburban parents agreed to a comprehensive interview. One parent, Liz, from the urban charter school who provided much information regarding parent involvement was extensively examined.

Additionally, two parents from the urban school volunteered to keep a journal for six weeks regarding their school involvement and discipline procedures at home and school.

Results/Discussion

Responses to the surveys suggests that parents regarded the curriculum, use of technology, and character education as the most important reasons for sending their child to a charter school. Urban school parents perceived the technology program as an important component of the school process, whereas suburban parents reported that they would like the role of parents to be expanded. It seems that from these responses that some parents from the suburban school want to be more involved in the school.

This urban charter school outlines the tasks of staff and teachers to encourage parents to become involved at all levels. They are communicating with families through technology, (voicemail, e-mail), weekly newsletters, and a promise that every phone call will be returned within twenty-four hours. The school as a policy of an "open door." The policy allows parents to come in when and if they want to knowing they are welcome. Clearly this school takes on responsibilities of eliciting involvement. Teachers are to view parents as partners and invite them into the classroom. What if teachers are unaware of parents perceptions and problems of involvement? Teachers may hold the notion that everything is fine, and simply blame parents for not being involved. As one teacher stated, "my good students are the ones with the good parents", defining involved parents as "good" and suggesting since there is an open door policy implying only "bad" parents do not become involved.

One parent from the urban school positively discussed how a teacher turned the class over to the parent. Another parent stated with conviction, "I think it's up to the parent to make their availability known to the teacher.. there are ways a parent can have access to the teachers classroom without interrupting the course of teaching." She went on to state that "teachers are not babysitters, the parent need to be there and parents need to input what they like and don't like." This illustrates that by scheduling, open communication, and expressing ideas the follow the structure (curriculum, philosophy) of the school, boundary issues seem to resolve themselves. That is; the lack of communication between teachers and parents may be viewed as an obstacle making some parents less involved. This may also demonstrate the opinion of parent involvement should be left up to the parent. A single mother of two whose children are at the charter school state, "they've had problems with some of the parents, but all the parents I've talked to are happy.. the ones that aren't is regarding the discipline program." Similarly, another parent state that "I see the same kids being disciplined over and over again. I went up to

the teacher at one point and said it's either him or me, or I'll pull my kid out of this computer club. " It is interesting to note that the parents' demands were met. This parent went on to state "this touchy, feely, warm cushy stuff has got to go, you can't let kids get away with it... I don't think that disciplined behavior is falling into the ethical character building and that it'll take too long for charter school people to convert bad behavior." This suggests that there is a discrepancy between the schools philosophy on discipline and parents. The quote reflects that although some parents who are not happy with the discipline code, they are feeling comfortable enough to express their opinions about it to other parents.

Interviews with parents from the urban school compared the charter school to their "horrific" experiences at the public school. One parent commented, "I feel safe knowing where my kids are and what they are doing during the time in school." The same parent went on to state, "I found improvement with the parent/teacher relationship because there wasn't one before at the public school." She stated, "I had to sneak in my children's old school to find out what's going on." She stated one incident at the charter school in which she called her child's teacher to say that the child had a rough morning, and that left the parent without worry. She stated, "There's no other way than active participation, to know what's going on." She compared how parents in the public school would have to sign in and get a pass to see their child in the classroom, and stated "by that time the teacher knew you were coming." She went on to state that " here it's an open door feeling you get from everyone, and I love how I can call the teacher direct and leave a message." Parents wanted an escaped from the public school nightmares they had faced. It seems that some parents who are communication with the teachers are receiving the feel of "community."

This charter school also is willing to let the parents become involved in ways that they see important. One parent replied "I would love to see a playground with recess." Now steps are being taken by parents to build a playground. These parents obtained a grant and by themselves are physically clearing the land and building the playground for the children. This suggests that parents are satisfied by "doing" and not just listening to what's being done at the school. This also suggests that this charter school provides an atmosphere for changes by parents.

One parent stated, "I was really impressed with teachers and the staff, I found them dedicated and caring. " This demonstrates the schools' responsibilities of involvement, and keeping the families informed.

Liz who is a single mom from the urban charter school reported she volunteers an average of twenty hours a week and is in contact with the teachers through technology and volunteering in the classroom at least tow to three days a week. She states, "I don't usually spend time volunteering in my sons classroom

because, knowing my son, it would distract him." Liz reported she agrees with the character attributes of the school stating, " I like the schools' commitment of keeping families informed and involved. Liz reported that technology has allowed her to access and communicate with the teacher stating, "using the e-mail system is very comfortable for me because I know I won't be disturbing her or the class". Liz explained that volunteering in the same classroom as the child is different from being in the school productively. She stated that, "I come in when I can and there's plenty going on to help out with." She reported she has been trying to establish a PTO but is disappointed with the parent turn out by stating, "I don't know how to get them involved. " This illustrates the lack of communication between parents. Also this exemplifies that parents may not want to return to the "public school ways." They came to this charter school looking for a difference. The school has let her try to form one because that's what she wants, but is it no wonder why there isn't a big involvement? Liz expressed frustrations she felt trying to get parents involved stating, "It's hard to get parents involved, they seem to have a lot of ideas and opinions but when it comes to getting them to act on their thoughts and ideas they seem to drift away.. I had hoped having computers in the homes would open up more parent involvement, only time will tell." Liz commented on how parents "drifted away" , is it because they are not sure what is expected of them? She went on to state, "with more computers in the homes some of us parents have started to communicate through our ' chat' sessions". As Liz points out the use of computers which were supplied by the school , may be viewed as a significant means of communication between parents.

She disclosed that she had not received a warm feeling from other parents about being at the school so much. She reported "I have gotten some sarcastic remarks on spending a lot of time at the school from some of the parents.. sometimes it makes me feel awkward and that maybe I am spending too much time volunteering there." Liz's statement suggests that parents conceptions regarding the role of parents may differ. Why are parents expressing negative feelings about Liz being at the school so much? Do they feel she's no in the right place, that as a parent she should be at home?

The schools' flexibility regarding parent involvement, may be causing some uncertainty in parents regarding their roles and involvement. It seems that parents may understand this policy differently. The "open door" policy may be too vague for parents regarding involvement.

Liz reported that she has been helping with the computer training course for other parents. She stated, "I also train as a parent trainer for the computer roll-out and will soon begin to train parents. I have been loading the software into the computers that will go home, there are three of us chipping away at about 475 computers." This suggests that involvement of parents relies on the availability of the parent. Liz has concerns regarding the discipline structure of the classroom

and school. She reported that the structure doesn't fit into what she had thought it would be. It should be noted that all parents must read and sign the code of conduct and accept the consequences when enforced. She stated, "The code of conduct and it's consequences are excellent, but I think it is intense at times for the ages of children in the first grade.. I wonder if they are emotionally capable at this age." This reinforces what was cited earlier as parents beliefs and the discipline issues with the school do not co-inside. She reported that the discipline at home is "something to be desired." Also Liz's statements help point out that what she has been volunteering on is not at all what some parents believe she should be doing. In that respect, the undefined guidelines of he role of parents are leaving parents free to do what they think will better the school. However would is be possible to gain more involvement if there were guidelines?

Metaphorically speaking this charter school's policy of an "open door" is trying to create a company like atmosphere for it's clients, the parents. The school is a framework and if parents want to be involved they are welcome. Although parents don't want to return back to public school mode for whatever reasons, at this charter school there is no definitive policy on parent involvement. In Liz's case she has been trying to achieve more communication between parents and because her efforts are being viewed negatively by others, it may suggest that some parents think that Liz doesn't belong there, and her amount of involvement is up to the teacher. I f parents are viewing parent involvement negatively then the roles of parents do not follow the philosophy of the school, meaning there is a misunderstanding somewhere along the lines of communication. Finally Liz's faith in technology may suggest that the education for the 21st century is going to be in home computers. Parent roles might involve home base involvement in order to stay in tune with the school.

It seem that this charter school is attempting to be a "community" by having and "open door" policy. What we have all heard in the past, regarding community is taking form as charter schools which the educational reform has allowed in Massachusetts. Change is based upon the needs of students and what parents want for their children our of a school. Charter schools are trying to provide change for parents, positive atmosphere, and challenging curriculum. The question is, will it succeed?

Summary

The research collected to date from this study suggests that the role of parent involvement seems unclear for at least some parents. Some of the reasons for low parent involvement may be related to work and time restraints. Perhaps there is a lack of communication between school and parents, teacher and parents, or between parents. Maybe the lack of a definition on the role of parents in school is related to low parent involvement. Does the statement, there's an "open door" here, provide

enough incentive for parents? Maybe this concept is too vague. They can come in but what are they going to do? For so long these parents were dealing with public schools where there was no sense of community, so how can they adjust to a new community with out a guideline on how to become involved? This raises several issues regarding the role of "parent as primary educator" and what it does it mean to school, staff and parents? As stated by Hillary Rodam Clinton, "children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society care enough to provide for them... technology connects us to the impersonal global village it has created" (1996). Students, parents, and school have to work together in order for charter school success. There seem to be an overall feeling that the charter school is trying to create a community from a level of commitment within. Do charter school create a community? Do parents feel a part of the community? As least some of the parents interviewed in this study are unsure of their role. As this statement applies, will the failure of charter schools be in part, due to the lack of "community"? They will turn into public schools without the achieved sense of involvement in the community, and involvement in the school. More questions arise regarding charter schools including "what makes a charter school work?"

1) Does parent involvement have to be defined with a written contract between charter school and family in order for the school to succeed?

2) Does technology and the promise of a "connection" between family and charter school constitute parent involvement?

3) Do discipline issues and methods in school have to coincide with the home in order for this process to succeed?

4) Who should elicit parent involvement, school, teacher, or parents?

5) If the teachers are responsible for eliciting all types of involvement, should there be a written contract to "ENSURE" involvement and take some of the pressures of chasing down parents off of teachers?

6) Does type of involvement (class, library, lunch, reading time, disciplinary, etc.) make a difference in a charter school?

7) What is the impact of parent involvement on the child at a charter school?

8) Families involved with charter schools know their schools philosophies. Why is it there are problems in with boundary issues, power struggles, types of involvement, and the amounts of involvement?

Clearly in order to guarantee it's success the role of parents in charter schools needs to be explored further.

References

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